

Putting out wildfires is not enough; defensive clearing and prescribed burn are also necessary

by Dianne MacLean

The summer of 2005 was a very busy fire season on the Kenai Peninsula. One of the many fires that year occurred near the area of this year's Caribou Hills Fire.

Coming in on a helicopter, we were able to see the fire burning through the tree tops, occasionally dropping to the ground. Our big concern was the group of houses scattered across the hillside just above the fire. Head-high brush and beetle-killed trees led straight from the fire up to the houses, and made for a potentially explosive situation.

The distant roar of radial engines announced the approach of a retardant plane, but not before a storm passed quickly overhead and dropped lightning strikes all around us, along with a significant amount of rain.

Even as the rain slowed the fire, we continued to take whatever assistance we could get with people and equipment coming and going to other fires. We obtained several smokejumpers on their way back to Fairbanks; we needed the additional chainsaw capability they would bring. A squad of eight firefighters arrived, bringing a valuable hose lay that they would be able to install. There was no telling how long the rain would last, or what we would be dealing with when it ended. Tomorrow, things would dry out again, and I wanted to be sure we did everything to keep this fire down, while the rain gave us a chance.

We held that fire to just a few acres, and had it mopped up by the end of the next day. Had we not gotten that shot of rain, would we have been able to stop it? Maybe, but not before those houses above us were threatened by fire racing up the hill.

Under the best of circumstances, this fire would have cleaned up the beetle-killed debris, and replaced it with new growth, less flammable than the old, and probably would have provided some much-needed food sources for moose, hares, and other wildlife.

The concept of "Wildland Fire Use" where a naturally ignited fire is used, under strict guidelines, to clean up hazardous accumulations of dead vegetation, allowed the Kenai Refuge to manage the Fox Creek Fire, also in 2005, for the habitat benefits it would

bring.

Wildland Fire Use, however, is not an acceptable option close to homes and recreational developments. We could not allow this fire to run its course. We had to stop it, along with many other lightning-caused fires that year. There was too much at stake, too much development in the way to take any other course of action. But, as many who live here have seen, fire will eventually come, whether we want it to or not.

There are many places on the Kenai Peninsula where we will never allow wildfire to run unoppressed, because of the threat to infrastructure. Thinning of trees near homes, along with prescribed burning in the wildland, can bring fire through an area in a controlled manner, according to a plan. With prescribed fire, we can remove old, highly flammable vegetation, or thin out trees that are spaced so close together that they would burn in an unstoppable crown fire.

When conditions are right, a prescribed fire will burn some of the decomposed organic "duff" layer, exposing mineral soil for birch and other hardwoods to germinate. This is one of the objectives of our prescribed burns: to encourage the succession of birch, willow, and aspen, just as it would occur naturally after a wildfire. In this way, we can capture the benefits of fire, in places where we cannot tolerate wildfires because of threats to human development.

With luck, the homes near the fire that we attacked in 2005 may still be there. The area was just enough south of Caribou Hills to possibly not have been swallowed up in this year's fire. I would like to think so. But without more preparation of homes and developments to withstand the passage of a wildfire, without more prescribed burning before the wildfires come, initial attack efforts like this little fire near the Caribou Hills in 2005 may only delay the inevitable.

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